

everybody bugs out

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BLOOMSBURY

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chapter nine

kissing action

Yumi turned twelve on Saturday and the five of us went to Fun-A-Palooza for her birthday. That's this really cool sports complex with go-carts, miniature golf, batting cages, and a huge arcade with all the best games.

Last time I went, my mom made me choose between racing on the go-cart track and hitting at the batting cages, and I chose the go carts, obviously. But for Yumi's party we didn't have to choose. We were staying all day, which meant we'd get to do it all.

Besides being super-excited about the party and hanging out with my friends, I was also glad I'd finally get the opportunity to talk to everyone about Oliver.

I'd had a crush on him for almost an entire week and I hadn't told anyone.

Not even my diary.

Of course, I don't tell my diary anything. My mom gave it to me on my tenth birthday and I haven't written in it since the day I opened it. And even then all I wrote was, "Dear Diary, Today is my birthday and my mom got me this journal."

Guess I've had a serious case of writer's block ever since.

Anyway, I couldn't talk about Oliver at school because I didn't want anyone to overhear and spread rumors. The last thing I needed was to be gossiped about at Birchwood Middle School.

And I still hadn't figured out whether or not I should bring up my crush in the first place.

Not before I asked Oliver to the dance.

If I was going to ask him.

Of course, that posed yet another problem, because what if I did ask him and he said no? Things might get awkward and we still had to work together for two weeks and six days. And that's just counting our science fair project. Even if I did manage to survive that weirdness, he'd still be my lab partner until school got out. And that was months away.

On the other hand, what if Oliver did like me and he was simply too shy to say so? Maybe he's been dying to ask me to the dance for weeks and hasn't been able to bring himself to make a move. Not to sound full of myself or completely delusional, because there were some signs.

At least I think there were. When we first started going to his house to work on our bug project, he asked if I wanted iced tea or lemonade and I said half-and-half. Then, on the second meeting he said, "Half-and-half, right, Annabelle?" And on the third meeting, and every meeting since then, he hasn't even had to ask. He just pours me a half-and-half automatically.

Remembering my favorite drink has got to count for something.

Or maybe I was just looking too hard. Oliver also remembered that Tobias liked lemonade. So maybe Oliver is just a nice guy with a really good memory.

But even forgetting the drinks, I had other reasons to be suspicious.

Oliver defended me whenever Tobias made rude comments, and that happened all the time. Of course, any good friend would defend me.

And I did catch him staring at me yesterday. True, I'd had a spinach calzone for lunch. So it's entirely possible that I had something green stuck in my teeth and didn't realize it. Maybe Oliver wanted to say something but decided not to because he didn't want to embarrass me.

I checked my teeth when I got home and didn't see anything. But maybe it had been there at Oliver's and only got dislodged on my way home. It's a five-minute drive, which by any calculation is plenty of time for a measly piece of spinach to dislodge and disappear.

Maybe I just wanted Oliver to stare at me so desperately that I convinced myself he had been when really he was staring at something just over my shoulder, like one of his mom's watercolors of the sea. They were really pretty. But he could stare at his mom's paintings anytime. Why do so when I was standing in his way?

Obviously I felt seriously confused. I needed advice, which is where my friends came in.

But I didn't bring Oliver up while we were at the batting cages. Someone was always hitting, and I didn't want to have to repeat the information twice.

Plus, the machines were loud and I didn't want to shout.

Being in the arcade posed the same problem. And I couldn't say anything when we were in the middle of the go-cart races. . . .

Even when we went out for pizza afterward, I couldn't tell them because Yumi's parents were at our table, and her baby sister, Suki, and her grandma. (Not the one who lives in Hawaii.)

Mrs. Tamagachi seemed sweet and all, but no way was I going to talk about liking a boy in front of someone's grandma. It's just not done.

After lunch and then another hour at the arcade, we headed back to Yumi's for a "make your own party hat" craft, then a "make your own sushi" dinner and then a "make your own sundae" dessert, followed by a "make your own sleepover."

By the time we'd rolled out our sleeping bags, I figured I'd waited long enough. Not only was I exhausted from making so much stuff, I also knew that if I didn't say something tonight, I'd never get the chance to. But for some reason, I kept stalling.

The timing never seemed right. Not even after Rachel brought up the school dance. "Two weeks and counting until Valentine's Day," she said, looking at her watch. "Ticktock."

“Digital watches don’t make that sound,” said Emma.

Rachel whacked her in the head with a pillow. “It’s a figure of speech, smarty-pants.”

Emma laughed. “I never understood that expression—smarty-pants. How can pants be smart? Or legs, even?”

Everyone groaned, and justifiably so.

Then Rachel started up again. “You guys, this is serious. We need to make plans.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve already got a date,” said Claire.

“I know,” Rachel said. “I just wish it was with Erik. Or at least with someone who was more like Erik. Like his secret twin.”

“Erik has a secret twin?” I asked.

“Only in her dreams,” said Emma.

Rachel turned to me and asked, “Has he asked Hannah to the dance yet?”

“Not sure,” I said, which was technically true. I didn’t tell Rachel that when our other classmate, Becky, asked Hannah about the dance, Hannah had changed the subject fast, without answering her.

“You should be happy you have a date,” said Claire. “Looks like I’ll be going solo, unless Yumi lends me one of her dates.”

“What?” Rachel and I asked at the same time.

Yumi blushed. “I kind of got asked.”

“By two guys,” said Claire.

“And you didn’t tell us?” asked Emma.

Yumi took off her party hat and tossed it aside. “It seemed too braggy to mention and I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, who asked you?” asked Rachel.

“Dante and Ezra,” Yumi said.

I felt a stab of envy, even though I didn’t know who either of these guys was. “I can’t believe you have two dates.”

“No, I’ve got none,” said Yumi. “Yes, they both asked me, but I haven’t given either one of them answers.”

“So which one do you like?” asked Rachel.

“Neither.” Yumi shrugged. “I mean, they’re both nice. Dante is a better baseball player, but Ezra is really funny. And not just gross armpit-fart funny or check-out-how-far-I-can-shoot-a-spitball hilarious. He’s much more sophisticated.”

“Too bad you can’t go with both of them,” said Claire.

“Well, *technically* you can,” said Rachel. “The dance will be crowded and it’s not like they’re even friends. So you could agree to meet them both there and just make sure they stay on opposite sides of the gym. Then you can run back and forth between songs, maybe changing dresses with each guy.”

“Why would I have to change dresses?” asked Yumi.

“I don’t know,” said Rachel. “Maybe to match each corsage?”

Yumi shook her head. “That sounds like a nightmare.”

“Or an old *Brady Bunch* episode,” I said.

“Oh yeah.” Rachel blushed.

“Anyway, wouldn’t her dates both want to escort her to the dance?” I asked.

“Look at you, all formal,” said Claire. “Escort!”

Everyone giggled.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“That’s not how it works in junior high,” Rachel explained. “Everyone just goes to the dances with their friends and they meet their dates there.”

“It all changes in high school,” Claire added.

“But I don’t think I want to go with either guy,” said Yumi. “And it seems wrong to say yes just so I’ll have a date. Almost like I was using one of them and—” Yumi stopped talking because her phone chimed with a new text message.

She reached for it, but Rachel got there first.

“What are you—hey stop!” Yumi cried, lunging for her phone, but Rachel wouldn’t let go. In fact, she stood up on her tippy-toes and held it over her head, far from Yumi’s grasp.

“That’s private property!” Yumi yelled.

“I’ll give it back to you as soon as you tell us who you’ve been texting all this time!”

“Okay, fine, but this is so mean to do to me on my birthday!”

“I’m doing it because I care!” Rachel said as she

handed back Yumi's phone. I kind of wished she'd read her text first. Forget that it's an invasion of privacy—I was curious. We all were.

“Don't keep us in suspense!” I said.

“I said I'd tell you.” Yumi brushed her hair from her face. “I met a boy in Hawaii.”

“What?” Claire asked.

“That's so great!” said Emma.

“And you're just telling us now?” asked Rachel.

“You never asked,” Yumi said.

“That's the kind of information you're just supposed to volunteer,” Rachel said.

“So what's his name?” I asked.

“Nathan,” Yumi said.

“Have any pictures?” asked Emma.

“Of course. Hold on. Let me just write him back.” Yumi began texting.

“What did he write?” asked Rachel.

“Wait a sec.” Once Yumi finished, she looked up at us and smiled. “Just Happy Birthday. Surf's up!”

“Surf's up?” asked Rachel.

“It's an inside joke,” said Yumi. “Too complicated to explain. You had to be there.”

“And what are you writing back?” asked Rachel.

“None of your business!” said Yumi. After she finished, she brought up a tiny picture on her cell phone screen.

We all huddled around the phone, trying to make out the image. The sun glinted in the background,

making it hard to see his face, and her screen was tiny. Almost too tiny for the five of us to be looking at once, but we managed.

Nathan seemed cute. He wore a green and blue floral print bathing suit and a blue and white rash guard. He was standing on the beach. He had black hair, or maybe it just looked that way because it was wet.

“Let’s see.” Claire moved in closer.

Rachel took the phone.

“Careful not to delete him!” said Yumi.

“Don’t worry!” said Rachel. “I have my own phone, so it’s not like I don’t know what I’m doing.”

When the phone finally got passed to me, I quickly scrolled through the shots. There were four pictures—the original of Nathan standing on the beach. Then Nathan biting into a hamburger, Nathan holding a boogie board, and Nathan smiling and waving at the camera.

None of Yumi and Nathan holding hands or riding horses together on the beach or having a picnic—those are the romantic images that flashed through my mind when Yumi first said she’d met a boy in Hawaii. But I guess if they were both doing all those things together it would be hard to document themselves on film. It’s not like they could hire a photographer.

“How’d you meet him?” I asked, handing back the phone.

“And where does he live?” Rachel asked.

“Did you guys kiss?” Claire wondered.

“Shh! Keep it down.” Yumi glanced at the door. “My parents are in the next room!”

“You mean they don’t know about him?” Rachel gasped. “Is it forbidden love?”

“No. Of course my parents know him,” said Yumi. “Our grandmas are friends, and his lives in the condo complex next door to mine. But they don’t want me spending too much time talking to him. Right now, I can only call him on weekends, after I finish all my homework. Luckily they never said anything about texting. . . .”

“So that’s why you’ve been spending so much time staring at your phone!” said Claire.

Yumi didn’t deny this. In fact, she didn’t say a word. I couldn’t believe she’d been sitting on the news for so long—acting like everything was normal when she was involved in a secret romance! For weeks now!

“So what’s the story? Tell us everything,” I said.

Yumi tiptoed to the doorway and peered out. “Okay, the coast is clear,” she said, joining us on the floor again. “We met on my third day there. That’s when his family arrived. They live in Michigan.”

“Michigan? That’s so far away,” said Claire.

“It’s in the Midwest,” Yumi told us. “In a different time zone, even.”

“So that’s why you don’t want to go to the dance with any guy from Birchwood,” said Rachel. “Because you have a secret boyfriend who lives far away.”

Yumi shook her head. “No, we’re not going out. We both know that it would be pointless because who knows if we’ll ever get to see each other again?”

“But that’s why you want to spend the summer in Hawaii,” said Emma.

“Well, yeah,” said Yumi. “He’s trying to do the same thing, so we can be together, but I don’t think it’s going to work. And I know summer is far away but I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“Did you kiss him?” asked Claire.

Yumi nodded and we all screamed into our pillows.

“Keep it down!” Yumi said, eyes wide and arms waving. “My parents don’t know about that part—obviously. Although I think they caught us holding hands once. So embarrassing.”

“What was it like?” asked Emma.

“Amazing,” said Yumi. “Magical. You know.”

“I know,” said Emma. “That’s how it was the first time with me. And that was just in my backyard. You guys were in Hawaii. On the beach.”

“Actually, we were at a snow cone stand.” Yumi tucked her hair behind her ears and smiled. “Well, the parking lot of the snow cone stand.”

“Did it happen before or after you ate snow cones?” asked Rachel.

“Before we finished eating, but after we ordered.”

“What kind of snow cones were they?” asked Claire.

“Like it matters!” said Rachel.

“Of course it matters. It’s her first kiss. Everything

matters.” Claire turned back to Yumi. “We need all the details.”

“I had cherry and blue raspberry. He had cola and coconut.”

“Did you taste his snow cone on your lips?” asked Rachel.

Yumi made her nose-crinkle face. “Not really. Luckily. I think coconut is gross.”

“I can’t believe you kissed a boy and never even told us about it,” said Claire.

“Shh!” Yumi raised a finger to her lips and gestured toward the door. “Parents. Right outside.”

“Sorry,” said Claire. “I’m just excited for you, is all. Anyway, I told you when I had my first kiss.”

“Wait, you did? How did I miss that?” I asked.

“It happened before we knew you,” said Claire.

“So fill me in!” I hardly believed all this news. I was seeing a whole new side of my friends. Were they always this mature and grown-up? And if so, how come I never noticed before?

Claire grinned. “It happened last summer, but I’m not even sure if it counts because it was a spin-the-bottle kiss at my cousin’s birthday party up in Fresno.”

“We’ve been over this,” said Rachel. “Your lips touched, so it definitely counts.”

“It’s true,” said Yumi. “A kiss is a kiss.”

“So what was it like?” I asked.

“Fast,” she said. “Faster than a blink almost. And I felt it on my lips and in my stomach. Kind of like a

hiccup, but a really fun one. I was so embarrassed, but the guys seemed to be, too, so that made me feel better. Like, I didn't have to worry about doing it wrong."

"How would you do it wrong?" Rachel asked, giggling.

"My point is, I knew I'd never have to see them again. So the pressure was off."

"Were they cute?" I asked.

"One was very cute and one was okay," said Claire. "Although the really cute guy had bad breath. And the only so-so one had really soft lips. He was the better kisser, I think, of the two, anyway. It's not like I have vast amounts of experience."

"Have you ever kissed anyone?" Claire asked.

"Who me?" I asked, even though Claire—and everyone else—was looking my way, so it was pretty obvious. "Um, not really. I mean, no. Never. Not yet, that is. I used to go to an all-girls school, remember? Even my camp was just for girls."

"It'll happen," Claire said with confidence.

Suddenly I felt really, really young. Like someone's little sister tagging along at the big kids' party.

"Rachel hasn't kissed anyone yet, either," said Yumi.

"Rub it in, why don't you." Rachel turned to Yumi. "But let's not talk about my pathetic lack of a love life."

"Says the girl who Caleb is madly in love with," Claire said.

"He's not in love with me," said Rachel.

"He drew your initials on his jeans," said Claire.

“Those could’ve been anyone’s initials,” said Rachel. “Tell us more about Nathan.”

“But first tell us more about the kissing,” Claire said, and the rest of us giggled.

“Did you do it a lot?” asked Claire.

Yumi nodded. “After the first six times, I stopped counting.”

“Wow!” said Emma. “You’ve probably kissed more than me.”

“But you’ve kissed two boys, for real,” said Yumi. “No offense, Claire.”

“None taken,” Claire replied.

She was referring to Emma’s ex-boyfriend, Corn Dog Joe, and her current boyfriend, Phil.

Emma shook her head. “Actually, Phil and I haven’t kissed yet. We’ve just held hands. A lot.”

“How come?” asked Yumi.

Emma shrugged. “Maybe he’s waiting until Valentine’s Day?”

“I’m glad you brought that up,” said Rachel. “Yumi, I understand that you’re into this dude, but you should still go to the dance. Just choose one of them and if you can’t decide then flip a coin.”

“I can’t do that!” said Yumi.

“Sure you can. It’s easy.” Rachel fished a quarter out of her backpack. “I’ll do it. Heads is Dante, tails is Ezra, okay?”

Yumi nodded and Rachel tossed the coin in the air. It landed on its side and rolled into a corner.

We all ran over to see what the verdict was. Heads.

“Does that still count?” asked Claire.

“Sure,” I said.

“Dante it is,” said Rachel.

“But I don’t want him to think I like him,” said Yumi.

“Just tell him you can only go to the dance as friends because your heart belongs to a boy in Michigan,” Rachel said.

“That’s so corny!” said Yumi.

“But it’s the truth,” said Rachel. “And there’s no reason that you should sit home alone on a Saturday night when you could be out having fun. Think of Dante as your backup date. He’s your Caleb.”

Yumi shook her head. “But I won’t have to be alone. Nathan and I can have a texting date. Or we can IM. And I’m trying to convince my parents to get me a new computer so we can do a video chat. My old one keeps crashing every time I try and download the software.”

“It’s not cool to stay home all night staring at a computer,” said Emma.

“Even if there’s a super-cute boy to talk to?” asked Yumi.

“Even so. You need to get out! If you don’t want to bring a date, I understand. But you should at least come to the dance.”

Yumi twisted up her mouth like she was thinking really hard. “I guess I’ll consider it.”

“Good!” said Rachel. “So that just leaves Anna-belle and Claire. How goes Operation Find-a-Date?”

I opened my mouth, trying to figure out the best way to bring up Oliver. But before I managed to get a word in, Claire said, “Guess what? I like someone. Although *like* is too mild a term. Basically, I’m madly in love with him and I’m pretty sure he likes me back,” she said.

“That’s great! Who is he?” I asked.

Claire grinned, her blue eyes gleaming. “Oliver.”